

An Analysis Of Social Media Racial Abuse Towards Mario Balotelli

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Racial Abuse and the Public Career of Mario Balotelli

Mario Balotelli has played the decisive roles in the English Premier League title for Manchester City F.C. in season 2011/12 and Italy's amazing run to the final at Euro Cup 2012. Recently, the football prodigy has proved his credentials in France, too, with OGC Nice. However, the Italian National is subject to the worst racial abuse on social media and on the field. The most incidents of racial discrimination have happened during the athlete's two years at Liverpool F.C. between 2014 and 2016.

The surge in the abusive incidents was a result of a series of poor performances after joining Liverpool FC from AC Milan. One such incident happened when Mario mocked Manchester United on Twitter on their shocking defeat against Leicester City on September 21, 2014. A large number of fans from different clubs, especially from MUFC, confronted the footballer and launched a series of racial remarks. Unfortunately, the remarks encountered by the footballer had nothing to do with his performance since the fans commented on the origin, race, and color of the star (theguardian.com, 2014).

The Premier League officials revealed that they are not obliged to act against the incidents involving hate speech and racism initiated by fans since their jurisdiction is confined to players, management, and staff. Furthermore, officials suggest that the police is the right institution to act against racial abuse towards athletes by fans on social media and on the field. According to Kick It Out, a globally recognized organization to watch and eliminate racism from football, the fans from different football clubs of EPL, including Liverpool F.C., have reportedly sent over 4,000 racist remarks in season 2014-15 alone (theguardian.com, 2014). In the Extraordinary FIFA Congress 2001, FIFA maintained that it expects the fans to strictly avoid practicing racism and assist the relevant bodies in the identification of any racial discrimination.

FIFA Regulation and Institutional Responses to Racism

Under Article 3 of FIFA Statutes, racial discrimination, in part and as a whole, is condemned. In 2013, FIFA constituted the Task Force Against Racism and Discrimination in response to the global campaign

Say No To Racism. Under the initiative, it was decided that the action would be extended to fans too who are proven guilty of practicing racism by halting their physical presence in the matches (img.fifa.com, 2017). However, no policy has been devised so far to tackle racism and discrimination on social media and blogs. After the 2014 FIFA World Cup, the organization faced sharp criticism for its lack of appropriate policy to deal with racism. Therefore, the Task Force decided to constitute and train officers to cope with discrimination (resources.fifa.com, 2017). It is reported that the action will span social media, too, in collaboration with media executives.

After the initial incidents were reported, the performance of Balotelli went down further as he admitted that he was unable to focus on the game as a result of increasing racial discrimination. Balotelli claimed that it was not the first incident of abuse against him and uncovered further that most of the abuses go unnoticed. Besides FIFA, UEFA has devised a policy to tackle racism (UEFA.com, n.d.). However, none of the representatives from both Associations responded specifically to this incident because they believed they did not keep the prerogative. Nevertheless, the global task formed by FIFA is now obliged to look after the incidents in the stadium and over the Internet.

While analyzing these responses, the fact remains inarguable that the athlete was a subject to unjustifiable racism. The response of Balotelli regarding the discrimination and racism in the past is legitimate, too, since undeniable evidence is available to support his claim. Although the poor performance of athletes as a result of such remarks is common, Balotelli's performance was already on the decline before this incident. In another incident, Mario's tweet was rightly labeled with anti-semitism as the player was unaware of the background. Therefore, athletes should take care while sharing views online. Mocking a team or a club can instigate emotions among fans.

Prejudice, Superiority, and the Social Psychology of Discrimination

Discrimination is a result of a superiority complex among people. One might not be superior in any other area except the one he or she brags about. Some factors are tools for conveying prejudice and hegemony only because it has been stereotyped for centuries. The studies show that racism and discrimination in football are not abrupt. The sensation of superiority is generated outside the game as a result of political, religious, or cultural differences. In such a case, club owners and other stakeholders are not the reasons for the prevalence of the social evil. However, this sensation is fueled further by the stakeholders so that they can keep cashing on the created hype.

Besides the self-esteem factor, racial remarks are also used as a tool to counter the triumph of rival teams. Before the 1990s, racial remarks were, by and large, considered legitimate and an essential element of the game. Therefore, an established mindset exists, and it may take a few more decades to change this perception (Mojet, 2005). Another research reveals that one of the major reasons for racial discrimination is the freedom that social media sites and blogs provide. Users feel more comfortable uttering a racist remark over the internet because, by this approach, they can easily

evade law enforcement personnel.

To change the collective attitudes of fans, a strict policy needs to be implemented to highlight and mitigate such incidents similar to the one that is enforced in stadiums. With the current technology of Artificial Intelligence and web crawling, racial abuse can not only be highlighted but can be eliminated, too. Facebook and Twitter have recently implemented algorithms to contain radicalization (Tulkens et al., 2016). Bringing examples from the past, one can establish that punishment can serve a purpose, too. One such incident from late 2014 penalized a fan, Liam Stacey, for his racist tweet directed towards an African football player who suffered from cardiac arrest. Although the fan was jailed for over two months, he claimed that the account was hacked (O'Connor, n.d.). In another incident, the fan claimed that he was under the severe influence of alcohol. Therefore, it is difficult to determine if the remark is uttered intentionally or not.

Platform Moderation and Strategies for Preventing Online Racial Abuse

Another suggestion would be to prevent remarks before they can be posted. Though it would need wider changes in policies for the social media owners, it is worth it to eradicate a major social evil. Finally, the most workable solution to racial discrimination would be changing the mindset of fans by discouraging the teams and media outlets that promote the phenomenon. Instead of penalizing the fans, the club owner and team management should be severely punished if they are found intentionally involved in the practice. The organizations outside football should play a part, too, because racism is not a result of rivalry in the game but political, religious, and cultural intolerance outside the game.

Football is the most popular game in the world, which allows diversity to be an essential part of teams and clubs. However, the game is hit by racism the most. Results of vast research conducted in this area have proved that the game creates such a huge influence over the fans that they get caught in uttering racial remarks as a way of expressing emotions. Elimination of racism requires a collective effort from clubs, fans, governing bodies, and those outside the influence of football.

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